

Do's and Don'ts of Effective Writing in Psychology

The primary purpose of APA style is to report information and findings in the field of psychology. Its goal is a clear, concise, and orderly flow of ideas presented in a scholarly and objective manner. Appropriate citation of the work of others is also paramount. The following do's and don'ts of writing are based on mistakes (both APA style errors and scholarly writing errors) commonly made by beginning writers in psychology. Many of the points raised earlier have been boiled down and summarized here, as well as more detailed points that bear specifically on APA rules. **Do** check your paper against this list before turning it in!

APA Style Errors:

1. **Don't write a novel.** Fiction writing and scientific writing have different purposes and consequently different styles. Don't weave a tale of suspense complete with foreshadowing, flashbacks or surprise endings. *Don't* wait until the end of the paper to give the punch line!

Do tell a story. Your paper should be a straightforward tale of a circumscribed question in want of an answer. The answer is your thesis, and you are going to tell the tale of why your thesis is the answer to the question. Keep it simple and direct and make it clear from the beginning what you are arguing.

2. **Don't try to "prove" a theory.** In science, you cannot prove a theory. The best you can hope for is that a theory accounts for the known data. There is always a chance that new data will come along that challenges the existing theory, and the theory will then have to be revised. So all theories in psychology (as in other scientific fields) are provisional. Therefore, it is incorrect to talk about "proof" in psychology. You are better off comparing and contrasting two or more alternative theories (or hypotheses), and showing that the weight of the evidence favors one of them. Your primary job in evaluating a hypothesis or a theory is deciding whether there is evidence in support of or against it, not whether there is proof for it.

Example (avoid): This proves that Bellows' (1998) theory was right.

Do support the theory. Even though you cannot prove a given theory, you can certainly provide support for (or against) it in the form of evidence.

Examples (preferable):

This study provides support for Bellows' (1998) theory.

The results of this study are consistent with Bellow's (1998) theory.

3. **Don't overuse low-value sources of evidence.** Not all sources of information are equal. Newspapers, popular magazines, and best-selling books are considered lower-value secondary sources. They may best be used to provide examples or case studies, which can be helpful when introducing your topic to the reader, but cite these sources sparingly.

Do use high-value journals and professional books as your main sources of scientific evidence. The highest value sources of scientific evidence are peer-reviewed journals. Many of these can be located online through the Harvard Library System (see Appendix), or in hard copy in Widener. Articles in peer-reviewed journals have been subjected to review by experts in the appropriate field of psychology. (Note that, in Reference sections, the APA gives preference to professional journals by capitalizing each word in the journal name.) Trade or professional books are also high-value sources (although these books are generally not subjected to peer review; APA capitalizes only the first word of a book title). The bulk of your reference section should be composed of articles from professional journals and chapters from professional trade books.

4. **Don't editorialize.** Avoid evaluative terms such as "horrible," "ridiculous," "indefensible," etc. Let the facts you present speak for themselves.

Examples (avoid):

"It would be foolish to ignore the evidence in favor of this theory."

"This study completely failed to prove the author's point."

"It is obvious that [this theory] is correct."

Do express your point of view through an objective presentation of evidence. One of the main goals of scientific writing is the **objective** reporting of information. Of course, you will have a point of view (your thesis). You want your readers to arrive at the same conclusion that you did by objectively weighing the evidence that you present.

5. **Don't overuse secondary sources.** If you find that you are using more than two or three "as cited in" references, then you need to get hold of the original articles and read them for yourself. Whenever you take one author's word for what another author has reported, you run the risk of misinterpretation. Use these secondary sources very sparingly. (Textbooks are considered secondary sources. They are summaries and interpretations of the work of others. As a rule, you should not cite textbooks in your paper.)

Do read the work of all authors whom you cite. Remember that you are responsible for the accurate reporting of the work of others. When you cite an author directly, the assumption is that you have read the work in question.

6. **Don't overuse technical jargon.** Psychology, like all scientific fields, has its own jargon. However, the more jargon you use, the narrower the audience who will "get" your paper. Strive to make your paper comprehensible to an

audience with a good general education.

Do define key terms. If you must use a technical term, be sure to define it (either directly or by using it in a context where its meaning becomes apparent).

Example (preferable):

“Expressed emotion (EE) refers to the amount of hostility, criticism, or overinvolvement by family members directed toward the patient.”

Also, be sure to define your specific intended usage of terms that may have multiple meanings or connotations. (The word *aggression* has one meaning for sports psychologists, a different meaning for psychopathologists, and still a different meaning for animal psychologists. Its specific meaning in your paper should be defined.)

Example (preferable):

“Aggression, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as any case of unprovoked attack (hitting, biting, or kicking) upon another child.”

7. **Don't overuse direct quotations.** Remember that although quotations from experts may be considered “evidence” in many liberal arts disciplines, the opinions of others are not considered evidence in scientific fields. Direct quotes interfere with the flow of ideas and should be used sparingly. Beginning writers in psychology often flood their papers with direct quotes from published researchers.

Example (avoid): Seidman et al. (1997) have stated that for ADHD “the impact on society is enormous in terms of financial cost, stress to families, disruption in schools, and its potential for leading to criminality and substance abuse” (p. 150).

Do rephrase and summarize the important points of other writers (properly cited, of course!) in your own words. Paraphrasing improves the flow of ideas.

Example (preferable): Seidman and his colleagues (1997) suggested that the social impact of ADHD is enormous, including financial costs, family stress, school disruption, and the potential for criminal behavior and substance abuse.

8. **Don't use footnotes or endnotes.** The interruption of shifting one's eyes to the bottom of the page or (worse!) to the end of the paper to read a note detracts from the orderly flow of ideas.

Do incorporate footnote material directly into the body of the paper. The APA guideline is: if it is important enough to include in the paper, put it in the body of the text. If it is not important enough, delete it altogether!

9. **Don't substitute synonyms when expressing a given concept or vary sentence structure in an attempt to make your sentences more interesting.** Using different words or phrases for the same concept will only confuse your readers.

Example (avoid): Extraverted children demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted, whereas, contrary to their more outgoing counterparts,

youngsters with an introverted temperament, do not get mad when their activities are interrupted.

Do attempt to use the same words or phrases each time you express a given concept to promote clarity. Parallel sentence construction also promotes clarity.

Example (preferable): Extraverted children demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted, whereas, introverted children do not demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted.

10. **Don't write in First Person.** Avoid reporting First Person personal anecdotes, as well as phrases such as "I feel..." or "I believe..."

Examples (avoid):

"My Aunt Chloe had the same experience with depression..."

"I feel like Crespi and Cameron (1992) should have included a placebo control group in their study..."

Do write in Third Person.

Examples (preferable):

"Chloe Johnson (personal communication, April 15, 1999) reported a similar experience with depression..."

"However, Crespi and Cameron (1992) did not include a placebo control group in their study..."

11. **Don't overuse present tense.** Present tense is appropriate when describing currently-held theories ("Terror Management Theory states that...") or general statements of fact ("Independent cultures place greater value on..."); as such, it is commonly used in introductory and concluding paragraphs, as well as in topic and closing sentences. Don't use present when describing specific work that occurred in the past however. Instead, use past tense if the work occurred at a specific time and present perfect tense if the work spanned several studies or several researchers.

Examples (avoid):

William James, in his 1890 treatise, examines how different researchers conceptualize the unconscious.

Carlyle revisits this question in a series of studies (1992; 1994).

Do use past or present perfect tense. These tenses are preferred for actions that have already occurred.

Examples (preferable):

William James, in his 1890 treatise, examined how different researchers conceptualized the unconscious.

Carlyle has revisited this question in a series of studies (1992; 1994).

General Scholarly Writing Errors:

1. **Don't make your thesis a guessing game!** Your reader should not have to guess at the main point of the paper.

Do formulate a restricted and concise thesis. Make your thesis very clear and narrow enough in scope that you can thoroughly address it in your paper. State the thesis early in the paper (first or second paragraph). Then do not wander away from the thesis.

2. **Don't expect your reader to automatically understand the importance of your thesis.**

Do present a motive for your thesis early in the paper. Why is your thesis important? What larger question or problem will your thesis, when properly supported, make strides toward answering? Give your reader a reason for wanting to read your paper.

3. **Don't use vague pronouns.** If your reader must retrace the previous sentence to determine whether "he" refers to the participant or the experimenter of a study you are describing, then clarity has been compromised.

Do check your pronouns. Make sure that each pronoun in your manuscript has an obvious referent. One good rule is to replace all simple pronouns (this, that, these, those) with the appropriate noun or noun phrase.

Incorrect: This indicates that creativity and IQ may be correlated.

Correct: The results of this study indicate that creativity and IQ may be correlated.

4. **Don't use passive voice.** Passive voice often makes the object of a sentence into the subject and forces the reader to retrace the action in order to understand it.

Example (avoid):

Incorrect: A connection was found by these researchers between creativity and IQ.

Incorrect: It has been shown that there is a connection between creativity and IQ.

Do use active voice whenever possible. Active voice moves the story forward and improves the flow of the writing.

Example (preferable):

Correct: These researchers found a connection between creativity and IQ.

5. **Don't include more than one idea per paragraph.** If you have a paragraph that takes up an entire page (double-spaced), check to see if it includes two or more ideas that can be divided.

Do keep paragraphs and sentences relatively short. Shorter sentences and paragraphs promote clarity. As a general guideline, you should have 2-3 paragraphs per page. Sentences should contain no more than 15-20 words. You

may intersperse shorter sentences, but avoid sentences as long as 30 words.

6. **Don't use colloquialisms.** Your writing should be scholarly, rather than conversational, in tone. A scholarly tone does not imply pretentiousness of language but rather an avoidance of colloquialisms that could interfere with precision and clarity.

Do choose language that is precise, clear, and scholarly. Some examples:

Examples:

| | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------|----------|
| Avoid | a whole lot | on the mend | just around the corner | write-up |
| Preferable | numerous | recovering | upcoming | report |

7. **Don't treat opposing points of view unfairly.** One mistake often made by beginning writers in psychology is called "bashing the counterargument." This technique includes finding very tiny methodological flaws in studies that contradict your thesis and using these flaws to completely discredit the opposing research results. The same microscopic flaw detection is not, however, employed when evaluating research supporting your thesis. This uneven handling of evidence generally backfires, as most readers will sense the unfairness and pull for the underdog!

Do present all sides of your argument fairly. Science is generally not black and white. You do not need to discredit all evidence that fails to support your thesis. You merely need to show in a convincing manner why your thesis is the best fit for the existing data.

8. **Don't write a single draft of your paper.** No one can write a good paper in one draft!

Do revise and edit your paper! Revise, proofread, and then revise and proofread again!

Here are some strategies for revising and improving the quality of your paper:

1. Lay it aside for 48 hours and then reread it. You will see many areas for improvement that were not apparent to you during the initial writing.
2. Read it out loud. It is often easier to hear (rather than see) sections that are unclear or awkwardly worded.
3. Give a copy to a friend (but be sure to proofread it first!). Then don't argue if the friend finds a section that is unclear. By definition, if it is unclear to your reader then it is unclear period!
4. Don't get too attached to a particular phrase, sentence, or paragraph. You have to be able to edit out anything, no matter how cleverly-worded, that does not advance your story.

APA Format Guidelines

The American Psychological Association has defined basic formatting rules for psychology papers. For more details consult *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2009).

General Document Format

- 1) Use one-inch margins top, bottom, and sides.
- 2) Double-space entire manuscript, including references.
- 3) Manuscript is left-justified and new paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces.
- 4) Use 12-pt. standard fonts (recommended: Times New Roman).
- 5) Although underlining and *italicizing* serve the same purpose, the *Publication Manual of the APA* recommends using *italics* rather than underlining. Use underlining only if required by your instructor, and make sure that you are consistent in your use of either *italics* or underlining.
- 6) Always include a title page unless advised otherwise by your instructor.
Title page is page 1 of paper.
Center title, author's name and other required information.
- 7) An abstract (one-paragraph summary of your paper) may be required (check with your instructor).
The abstract (if required) is page 2 of paper.

In-Text Citations

Science advances by building on the work of others. It is important to give credit to all who have contributed ideas, findings, opinions, and theories. The rule is **cite everything that is not your own idea or is not common knowledge**. In-text citations include the author's last name and the date of the publication cited. When direct quotations are used, the page number of the quote is also cited.

- **Single Author:** If the author's name appears as part of the narrative, follow the name with the publication date in parentheses. Otherwise, both the author's name and publication date are placed in parentheses.

Examples: Sternberg (1990) presented writing tips for psychologists.

Clarity is a primary objective in good academic writing (Williams, 1990).

- **Two Authors:** If the authors' names appear in the text, connect them with "and." However, if the authors' names appear only in the parenthetical citation connect them with "&."

Examples: Costa and McCrae (1985) suggested a five-factor model...

The five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985) includes...

- **Three to Five Authors:** List all authors the first time a work is cited. Thereafter, use the first author's name followed by "et al."

Examples: Hodges, Cooper, and Bushman (1992) examined...

Hodges et al. (1992) also examined...

- **Six or More Authors:** Use the first author's name followed by "et al." every time the work is cited (including the first time). However, in the Reference section, list the names of the first six authors, replace the next authors with an ellipsis (...), then list the final author.
- **More than One Work in a Citation:** List **alphabetically** by first author's last name. Separate each work with a semicolon.

Example: Several authors have noted the importance of clarity in academic writing (Bem, 1998; Hummel & Kaeck, 1995; Williams, 1990).

- **Works by Associations, Corporations, or Government Agencies:** Write out the name of the group that serves as author (corporate author) each time they are cited in text unless the abbreviation of the name is familiar. In the case of familiar abbreviations, write out the entire name in the first citation and use the abbreviation in subsequent citations. The rule is to ensure that the reader will have enough information in the citation to locate the entry in the reference section.

Example: (*first citation*) Over 12 million women suffer from depression each Year (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 1999).

(*later citations*): Twice as many women suffer from depression as men (NIMH, 1999).

- **Direct Quotations (Less than 40 words):** Incorporate them into the structure of the sentence or paragraph, enclose within double quotation marks, and follow with a parenthetical citation including author, publication date, and page number.

Example: Wisdom, in this context, is defined as "an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life" (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 122).

- **Direct Quotations (More than 40 words):** Do not use quotation marks. Indent the entire passage five spaces from the left margin and follow with a parenthetical citation including author, publication date, and page number.

Example: One typical problem encountered in data collection is that of missing data. The authors provide explicit directions for scoring:

If the respondent has not provided a response to every item and the respondent is no longer available to the examiner, the examiner must determine whether the data may be validly scored and interpreted. The NEO PI-R should not be scored if 41 or more responses are missing. (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p. 5)

- **Secondary Sources:** You should cite only works that you have actually read. If you read about a study by Mednick and Schulsinger cited in a book by Durand and Barlow, your parenthetical citation should include the cited author(s)' name followed by "as cited in" and the author(s)' name/publication date of the source which you actually read. Put only the source you read in the reference section. Use secondary sources sparingly!

Example: A similar study examined children at high risk for schizophrenia (Mednick & Schulsinger, as cited in Durand & Barlow, 1997).

- **Personal Communications:** Letters, personal conversations, email, and lab discussions provide us with insight and information on topics of interest. These communications are legitimate sources of information and may be cited in your papers. Place authors' initials and last name, followed by "personal communication" and the full date in parentheses.

Example: (R.J. McNally, personal communication, April 8, 2001)

Note that accuracy in reporting personal communications is your responsibility!

Reference Section

The reference section should begin on a separate page with the word "References" centered at the top. The section should employ the "hanging indent" format, with the first line flush left and subsequent lines indented 5-7 spaces. All entries should be alphabetized by the first author's last name. Note that book titles and journal names are italicized. The first letter of every word in the journal title is capitalized, whereas only the first letter of the first word of a book title is capitalized. (Please see the reference section at the end of this booklet for an example, but note that in term papers the section will be double-spaced.)

Journal Articles: Include the following:

- **Author** (Last name, comma, 1st initial, period, 2nd initial, period)
- **Year of Publication** (in parentheses, period)
- **Name of journal article** (lower case, period)
- **Name of Journal** (italicized, 1st letter of each word uppercase, comma)
- **Volume (and issue in parentheses) of journal** (italicized, comma)
- **Page numbers of articles** (period)
- If available, **Digital Object Identifier** (prefaced with doi:)

Example: (using hanging indent format)

McCrae, R.R. (1987). Creativity, divergent thinking, and openness to experience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52 (6), 1258-1263. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.52.6.1258

Books: Include the following:

- **Author** (Last name, comma, 1st initial, period, 2nd initial, period, comma, next author, comma, &, last author, period)

- **Year of Publication** (in parentheses, period)
- **Name of Book** (italicized, lower case, period)
- **City of Publication** (colon)
- **Publisher** (period)

Example:

Williams, J.M. (1990). *Style: Toward clarity and grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chapter Within a Book: Include the following:

- **Author** (Last name, comma, 1st initial, comma, 2nd initial, next author, comma, &, last author, period)
- **Year of Publication** (in parentheses, period)
- **Name of book chapter** (lower case, period)
- **Name of Editors** (preceded by "In," 1st initial of 1st author, period, last name, &, 2nd author, parenthesis, "Eds.", parenthesis, comma)
- **Name of Book** (italicized, lower case, period)
- **City of Publication** (colon)
- **Publisher** (period)

Example:

Eysenck, H.J (1995). Creativity as a product of intelligence and personality. In D. Saklofske & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *International handbook of personality and intelligence*. New York: Plenum Press.

Electronic References: Because a variety of different types of references are available online, APA guidelines for such references are often updated. You may check the following website for the most up-to-date referencing of electronic sources:

http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic28359.files/Undergraduates/Forms_for_Undergraduates/APAStyleGuidetoElectronicReferences.pdf.

You will need to log in with your HUID and PIN.

Starting in the 6th edition of the APA Publication Manual, the APA asks that you provide the Digital Object Identifier (DOI). DOIs are links to the article and are more stable than regular URLs.

Headings

Headings and subheadings are extremely useful in scientific writing and serve several purposes:

- 1) They divide the paper into orderly sections.
- 2) They act as an outline of the paper.
- 3) They reduce the need for transition paragraphs.
- 4) They help the reader anticipate material.
- 5) They help the reader locate specific material of interest.

The *Publication Manual of the APA* (2009) lists five levels of headings and subheadings. For most student papers, the first three levels should be sufficient, but longer, more in-depth papers may require levels 4 and 5.

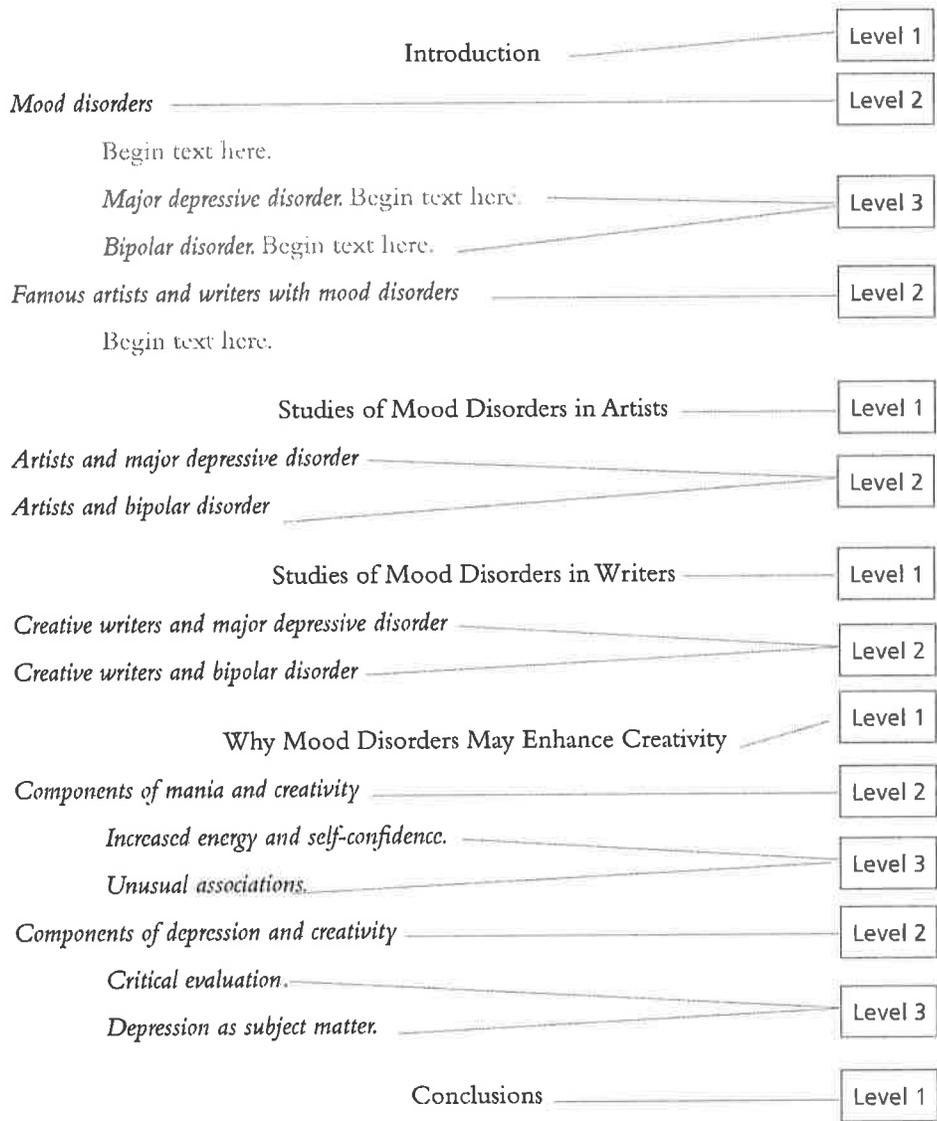
| Level | Format |
|-------|--|
| 1 | Centered, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase Headings Then your paragraph begins below, indented like a regular paragraph. |
| 2 | Left-aligned, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase Heading Then your paragraph begins below, indented like a regular paragraph. |
| 3 | Indented, boldface, lowercase heading ending with a period. Your paragraph begins right here, on the same line as the heading. |
| 4 | <i>Indented, boldface, italicized, lowercase heading ending with a period.</i> Your paragraph begins right here, on the same line as the heading. |
| 5 | <i>Indented, italicized, lowercase heading ending with a period.</i> Your paragraph begins right here, on the same line as the heading. |

Level 1 headings are used for the title and main sections of the paper (e.g. major sections of your literature review, Method, Results, Discussion). Start text on the line following a Level 1 heading and indent the text.

Level 2 headings are used for subscriptions within the main sections. For example, in the Method section of a paper, it would be used for Participants, Measures, and Procedure. Start text on the line following a Level 2 heading and indent the text.

Level 3 headings are used to divide up these subsections. For example, in the Measures subsection of the Method section, it would be used to describe individual measures, such as the Beck Depression Inventory, NEO-PI, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, etc. Start text on the same line as the Level 3 heading, right after the period.

Here is an example of headings and subheadings from the term paper outline on artists and mood disorders shown earlier.



Word Usage and Unbiased Language

It is permissible to use the word 'subjects' or the word 'participants' to describe individuals who participate in research.

The 6th edition emphasizes the use of unbiased language.

Examples:

| Problematic | Preferred | Note |
|--|---|--|
| wife/husband mankind housewife | spouse humankind, people homemaker | Use gender-neutral language when possible |
| homosexuals | gay males lesbian females | Use this form when referring to sexual orientation |
| Oriental | Asian | Use specific race and ethnicity |
| Native American | Hopi, Seminole | Use nation name when possible |
| disabled person the mentally ill depressives | person with disability persons with mental illness people who are depressed | Disability - put the person before the disability |

References

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